

UNC System President Peter Hans**Commencement address at North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics - Morganton
May 24, 2024**

Good morning and thank you so much for inviting me to be here on this history-making day!

I have been around long enough to remember when the School of Science and Math in Morganton seemed like a far-fetched idea, and now we're all here in this gorgeous place, celebrating the very first class to call this campus home.

And it is a beautiful campus, a magnificent blend of old and new. I was talking to Chancellor Roberts not too long after this place opened and all of you were getting settled in. "How's everything going?" I asked him. "How are the facilities, the classrooms, the dorms? Everything working ok?"

He said things were great — except for a little problem with the residence hall elevators. Apparently, the Chancellor told me, if a whole group of students works together and jumps as high as they can at the same time in the same elevator, they get stuck. [Pause...]

"Wait a minute," I told Chancellor Roberts. "You mean to tell me that some of the smartest, most accomplished students in all of North Carolina managed to break a brand-new elevator by horsing around during their first semester at this place?"

"No, no, no, Mr. President," he said. "You don't understand — this is the School of Science and Math. Those students weren't horsing around — they were conducting *a carefully controlled scientific experiment* on the safety systems of the residence hall elevators — and it was a successful test."

This is what makes a great Chancellor — always staying on-brand.

I trust that the aspiring elevator scientists are with us today, and I extend my thanks for your dedicated service to this campus. Future students can rest easy thanks to you — and perhaps keep their feet on the floor when the elevator is moving.

Every time I visit this amazing school, I think about what an extraordinary act of confidence and creativity it was to imagine such a place.

Most of you have grown up with a sense of North Carolina as a thriving state — one of the fastest-growing in the country, with a dynamic economy that includes everything from agriculture to artificial intelligence. For as long as y'all have been alive, we've been showing up on national lists of best places to live, best states for business, best places to go to school or raise a family.

It wasn't always that way. Long, long ago — back when I was a kid, and Math and Science was just getting started in Durham — North Carolina's future looked shaky. Traditional industries like tobacco, textiles, and furniture were in decline, and it wasn't at all clear what might replace them. To John Ehle, that looked like the right moment to build something. Ehle, as I'm sure some of you know, was a North Carolina-born novelist, playwright, and teacher. And he was a prolific founder of institutions, including the one you're graduating from today.

Asked by Governor Sanford to come up with ideas for improving education in North Carolina, Ehle helped dream up School of the Arts in Winston Salem; the North Carolina Governor's School; and the country's first residential high school for students gifted in math and science. Ehle was a great believer in the God-given capacity of his fellow North Carolinians, someone who spent a lifetime noticing the overlooked talents, passions, and humanity of his fellow citizens.

He also believed deeply in the power of education and curiosity to bridge the great divides in our lives, to help us see with compassion across barriers of race, class, time, and politics. In his novels and nonfiction works, Ehle wrote with beauty and understanding about settlers and civil rights activists; about Native Americans and railroad barons; about mountain families torn apart by the Civil War. He knew from experience that this state contains a vast, fascinating array of cultures, traditions, and stories — all of them worth celebrating.

That's part of the reason you all hail from every part of North Carolina, why this school wanted to bring you all together under one roof to live and learn alongside each other. Some of the greatest divides of our time are about geography and class, about the different opportunities available in small towns and big cities, in rural regions and fast-growing suburbs. About the different values that come from growing up in a farming community or a quirky college town, about the different perspectives you bring as the son of immigrants or the granddaughter of mill owners. Knitting together a North Carolina that holds so much diversity of life and culture will be one of the critical tasks of your time, and you'll be much better at it because of the years you spent here in Morganton.

I also hope you'll consider building some institutions of your own. It sounds corny to say it, but this place — this magnificent new campus, with its labs and performance spaces and brilliant teachers and staff — started as a half-baked idea. Like a lot of restless writers, Ehle was a social critic — someone who showed his love of this state by willing it to be better. All of his work in education began as acts of criticism. Ehle had a long history of frustration with the lack of opportunities for North Carolina's most gifted students, what he viewed as a lack of ambition in how we cultivated the talents of our young people, and he wasn't quiet about it.

Ehle told an interviewer in 2005: "I've always been critical. That seems to me to be basic to creativity."

But Ehle didn't stop with criticism. He knew that offering a sharp observation about a problem was just the first step toward action. Given the opportunity to do something constructive about the failures that frustrated him, Ehle didn't hesitate. He took the job working for the Governor; he set aside his own artistic ambition for a while to work with the Ford Foundation and tackle the deep problems he saw.

He showed how creative energy can be the spark for real progress, and how the truest sign of commitment is sticking around for the hard work of building and reform. The same was true for local and state leaders who willed this campus into reality through sheer determination. It's so, so easy to tear things down — to find the faults and call out the failures, to demand that someone else fix the wrongs that are so clearly visible to you. Having the patience to turn criticism into constructive action is one of the most important things we can do for the people, places, and causes we love.

You are all leaving here as experienced institution-builders, having pioneered this new campus and helped establish its culture and rituals for all those who will come after you. You all had the bravery and curiosity to take a chance on a new place, with people you didn't know, and you've helped shape it into something wonderful.

I hope you'll carry the confidence of that experience through the rest of your lives, because we so badly need people with the courage to build. All of the big challenges facing our state and our society will require shared work, and institutions are the way you bring people together to accomplish anything meaningful. Your lives and your opportunities were broadened by people who turned critique into creation, who did the hard work of building schools and sports leagues, churches and community centers, businesses and book clubs — organizations, large and small, that bring people together for a shared purpose.

That, I truly believe, is the deepest calling of our time — to resist the temptation to retreat into your own life and individual concerns and find instead all the joys and frustrations and profound gifts of doing good work alongside others. For there is still so, so much good work to be done. John Ehle once wrote, "The best understanding of America begins with the realization that this nation is young yet, that she is still new and unfinished, that even now America is man's greatest adventure in time and space."

I can't wait to see what this country and this state will become when you all have had the chance to build something new. Hopefully that will occur after your guaranteed admission into a UNC System school. May God bless your journey and go Dragons!